

Leading causes of death and rank order among males, by race, and race ratios for selected age groups, United States, 1977

Cause of death	Rank order		Ratio ¹
	White males	All other males	
15-24 years			
All causes			1.23
Accidents	1	1	0.76
Homicide	3	2	5.70
Suicide	2	3	0.68
Heart disease	5	4	2.50
Cancer	4	5	0.76
25-44 years			
All causes			2.41
Homicide	5	1	7.68
Accidents	1	2	1.59
Heart disease	2	3	1.91
Cancer	3	4	1.43
Cirrhosis of the liver	6	5	3.83

¹ Ratio of death rate per 100,000 population in age group for all other males to the rate for white males.

SOURCE: Division of Vital Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics.

males of other races, and it is the third leading cause for white males. For these young males of other races, the ratio reflects a rate almost six times that of whites. For the age group 25-44 years, the differential is almost eight times that of whites.

In summary, NCHS data indicate a marked differential in patterns of mortality between the white and black populations of this country, beginning in infancy (when black infants are about twice as likely as white infants to die in their first year), and extending through the productive years of life. The differentials persist for many causes of death. Homicide among black males is one of our most striking and serious problems from a public health and social point of view.

Perils and Pitfalls of Systems That Collect Data on Homicide

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In October 1979, the National Institute of Justice funded a 2-year study of homicide patterns by the Center for the Study of Crime, Delinquency, and Corrections at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. The two parts of the study are (a) the analysis of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) data tapes on homicides for the period 1968-78 and (b) pilot studies of eight American cities in which data are being

collected from medical examiners and police departments on homicide for the year 1978.

The main source of nationwide data is supplementary homicide reports filed with the FBI by local police departments. Homicide information is reported in terms of an event. Data collected include State and county of death; month and year of death; age, race, and sex of offender and victim; number of victims and offenders; weapon; relationship of victim to offender; and circumstances of the offense.

FBI data can be helpful in studying black homicide beginning in 1976, but they are not useful for long-term studies involving race of offender and victim before that date because the local police departments' supplementary homicide reports before 1976 were essentially reports about the victims. Information about offenders was aggregated into monthly summary reports of the number of offenders classified by age group, 14 to 20 years, 20 to 25, and so forth. It is almost impossible to reconstruct homicide cases using this data to determine, for example, if a white person was the victim of a black offender. In 1976 the FBI began collecting data using an incident-based system. This change has substantial implications for the study of black homicide, since it is now possible to compare victim and offender characteristics, including race.

The NCHS data tapes include statistical information on deaths based on death certificates completed by local medical examiners, coroners, and physicians throughout the United States, and they may be purchased from the National Technical Information Service. Data include State and county of death, specific date of death (in contrast to the FBI data which provide month and year); victim's age, race, sex, and place of residence; weapon; location of assault; whether an autopsy was performed; whether the finding from the autopsy was used to determine cause of death; and the medical cause of death.

Definitions of homicide complicate comparisons of the two data systems. The FBI includes murder and nonnegligent manslaughter under the rubric of homicide but excludes deaths due to negligence, justifiable homicides, and excusable homicides. The NCHS system defines homicide as any violent death committed by one human being against another, excluding only suicides, accidents, and legal executions. Despite differences in definition, there appears to be a reasonably high level of agreement between the two data sources at a national level.

Agreement on national totals, however, does not necessarily mean agreement on smaller units such as cities. The FBI's "Uniform Crime Reports" collects cases by place of assault; NCHS tabulates and publishes the data by victim's place of residence. The two data sets may vary greatly for cities with large transient populations. To establish comparable statistics, data sets from cities should include police and medical information. With information from both sources, investigators can match police department and local medical examiner records and account for variations in the two. They should then be able to determine the advantages and limitations of national homicide data.